GARETH REEVES

Auden and religion

Auden liked systems. He liked to categorize and pigeon-hole, but invariably with the awareness that all systems and categories only work on their own terms, that the systematizer is implicated in his creations, that consciousness, while freeing us to explain ourselves to ourselves and to each other, also imprisons us in the explanations we have framed. There can be no one to stand outside and watch (except God). Hence the provisionality, audible in all his poetry if carefully listened to, of the various systems of belief he entertained one after the other, Freudian, Marxist, liberal humanist, even and finally Christian – although this last came to seem to Auden the one that gave him the most room to manoeuvre. Such freedom within restraint characterizes also, and especially, Auden's attitude to poetry. Poetic form may be arbitrary, but within its limits and limitations it permits, or rather induces, quest and discovery, although the object of discovery, especially for the Christian Auden, is always out of reach. The limits of poetry make us aware of what lies beyond, as he wrote in "Un Homme d'Esprit": "The formal restrictions of poetry teach us that the thoughts which arise from our needs, feelings, and experiences are only a small part of the thoughts of which we are capable" (F&A: 364). Poetry came to be for Auden the most serious game of homo ludens. His "Ode to Terminus" thanks the god of limits "for giving us games and grammar and metres". But disaster happens when one system encroaches on another, the artistic on the political, say: in "The Poet and The City" Auden argued that a "society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the

whole" would be a horrific dictatorship practising brutal eugenics, and gave a tongue-in-cheek demonstration of the petty-tyrant poet's method of composition, his verbal "selective breeding" and "extermination", the dictatorial techniques of re-phrasing, transposition and cuts (DH: 85). "Poetry makes nothing happen", he famously wrote in 1939, but he also wrote in the same poem that it is a "way of happening"; and even, perhaps especially, in the face of his espousal of Christianity in 1940, he needed to demonstrate, to himself as much as to his readers, the nature and importance of poetry's particular way of happening.

Auden's account of his conversion reveals that he knew he had always needed to entertain systems. With some condescension he writes that the "various 'kerygmas'" – preachings – of Blake, Lawrence, Freud and Marx taken up by him and his contemporaries in the 1930's, "were all Christian heresies". At least they were all based on the religious belief that "matter, the natural order, is real and redeemable … and historical time is real and significant".[1] Psychoanalysis, Freudianism, Marxism, are all partial and monistic explanations, whereas Christianity is complete. He quoted approvingly Nietzsche's view of Christianity as "a system, a view of things, consistently thought out and complete. If we break out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, we thereby break the whole into pieces."[2] Christianity subsumes all other systems; it is the system to end all systems. This way of thinking reverses even as it is consistent with earlier Auden, who, in an essay called "The Good Life" published in 1935, attempted to synthesize religious, scientific, philosophical and political systems, and concluded by finding Christianity wanting in comparison with the other systems when faced with the challenges of the modern world. One can imagine an older Auden with the benefit of hindsight finding the seeds of his religious conversion in the questions posed in the essay, "If our desires are mutually

incompatible, which are we to choose? i.e. what ought we to desire and do, and what ought we not to desire and do?"[3] These questions were to be given a Kierkegaardian Christian-existentialist answer, where that "ought" becomes a Christian imperative, and our freedom to choose an unknowing "leap of faith". So when Humphrey Carpenter emphasizes the rationality behind Auden's religious beliefs, writing that his "conversion had apparently been an exclusively intellectual process rather than a spiritual experience", he is pointing to a deep-seated tendency that had been with Auden from early on (Carpenter: 298). That rationality eventually involved the recognition that Christianity paradoxically requires the exhaustion of all reasonable explanations and a leap of faith into the unknown and unreasonable.

Hence New Year Letter, which reasons its way towards Christianity, quotes St Anselm's "credo ut intelligam", "I believe in order that I may understand" (NYL: line 422), for absolute and irrational belief permits, because it goes beyond, the exercise and play of that most human of faculties, the reason that accompanies understanding. Characteristically, Auden "the double man" (the work's original, American, title), the categorizer and qualifier who sees himself in the mirror and on the other side of every argument, must use reason to get beyond reason. Moreover at this time (the poem was written between January and April 1940) the internal struggle was urgent, for Hitler's domination of Europe and the start of war signalled for Auden the failure of reason, the stand-by of the liberal humanist. As he was to remember sixteen years later, "the liberal humanism of the past had failed to produce the universal peace and prosperity it promised, failed even to prevent a World War." (Canterbury Pilgrims: 40) And in 1940 he wrote that "The whole trend of liberal thought … has been to undermine faith in the absolute" by trying "to make reason the judge", an argument he read in Reinhold Niebuhr's book An Interpretation of

Christian Ethics (1936) and which must have weighed heavily on an intellect as active as Auden's.[4]

"Historical time is real and significant" for Auden because the Christian's belief in "a personal God implies that the relation of every human being to Him is unique and historical", as he wrote in Canterbury Pilgrims (32). So History must be schematised to see where I am now, at this moment in History. One statement in "The Good Life" which the Christian Auden would have found proleptic acknowledges the point of view that the "existence [of evil desires] in us is to be explained by the Fall – an inherited defect in our nature, which, since God is good, must be attributed to a volitional act of rebellion at some period of human development" (34-5). As Carpenter points out, this view of the Christian doctrine of the Fall as "a representation of a fact of human psychology" became characteristic of Auden's religious thought: he saw the Fall "as a symbol of the point in history where Man developed self-consciousness and became aware of the possibility of freedom and autonomy" (Carpenter: 299) Thus New Year Letter focuses in on this central and distinguishing fact, that "Man faulted into consciousness" (line 1110), that alone of all creation we know who we are and what we are doing, knowledge which is the ground of our freedom and our responsibility to choose. The poem thus gives a Christian twist to the existentialism of the sonnet sequence "In Time of War" from Journey to a War (1939), with its evolutionary version of History to the point where we are "now" ("Yes, we are going to suffer, now", sonnet XIV; "Where life is evil now", sonnet XVI), when "We live in freedom by necessity" (sonnet XXVII), a phrase which conjures up in an intriguing blend of elegy and expectancy Engels's dictum, "freedom is the knowledge of necessity". From here the way for Auden led to Kierkegaard: "As a spirit, a conscious person endowed with free will, every man has, through faith and

grace, a unique 'existential' relation to God, and few since St. Augustine have described this relation more profoundly than Kierkegaard." Canterbury Pilgrims, from which this derives (41-2), explains that one reason for the attraction of Kierkegaard (other reasons, not unrelated, were his humour and his "talent … of making Christianity sound bohemian") was the capaciousness and generosity, the paradoxically unsystematic nature of his system, for it comprehends all that makes us human. Kierkegaard's view of humanity as made up of conscious beings perpetually obliged to exercise their free will to choose from an infinity of foreseeable possibilities, means that each individual presents his unique case.

But for Auden poetry's way of happening cannot be existential, for it deals in things completed, not things foreseeable; it is art, not life:

> Art in intention is mimesis
> But, realized, the resemblance ceases;
> Art is not life, and cannot be
> A midwife to society,
> For art is a fait accompli. (NYL, lines 76-80)

These lines occur near the start of New Year Letter in the context of contemporary Nazi anarchy, and the "task", both in "Art and Life" is to "set in order" (lines 56-8). "Midwife to society" flirts with a jocularly dismissive tone, raising the question of whether such a fate for poetry is desirable, for the orders of art are potentially dangerous in the ways described in "The Poet and the City". But the poet never allows himself to give up on the possibility of poetry's efficacy, and characteristically the opposed view is allowed a sly look-in. In the parabolic model of poetry which this verse-paragraph goes on to describe, "unique events that once took place", when used in a poem, change into

An abstract model of events

Derived from dead experience,

And each life must itself decide

To what and how it be applied. (lines 95-8)

The style of New Year Letter sounds reasonable, but the reasoning is often slippery. Here the poet holds his cards close to his chest with "And": the necessity thus to "decide" shows that poetry is either ethically neutral, or that it is ethically invigorating since we are compelled to exercise choice. Substituting "But" for "And" would tend to tip the balance in favour of the first alternative, emphasizing the gap between art and life: "but it is up to us as to how to apply art's model to life", rather than "and, as a consequence, we are able to apply". Poetry reads us as we read it. It becomes a parable of our freedom to choose, of our moral being.

How we receive poetry depends on our predisposition. Thus in New Year Letter the devil has "no positive existence": as our self-projection and double agent he is only our "recurrent state / Of fear and faithlessness and hate" (lines 414-16). As such he does not tell lies "But half-truths we can synthesize: / So, hidden in his hocus-pocus, / There lies the gift of double focus." (lines 826-9) As Stan Smith points out, Auden is here "turning his favourite trick on the word 'lies', changing its grammatical function from noun to verb as its semantic function too is converted from language to physical position."[5] That change artfully demonstrates how by indirections we may, so the poet hopes, find directions out: by tempting us with half-truths the devil presents us with the possibility of truth. Thus poetry is like a "magic lamp", "utterly impractical, / Yet, if Aladdin use it right, / Can be a sesame to light." (lines 830-4) The utter impracticality of poetry has its guiltily negative aspect ("For poetry makes nothing happen"), but not being a midwife to society may not be such a bad thing if it

can be a doorway to the “light” beyond, a means of leaping. A note to these lines intimates this tension between guilty aesthetic delight and ethical aspiration, its optative mood: “The Devil, indeed, is the father of Poetry, for poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings. The Poetic mood is never indicative.” The synthesizing poetic intelligence has to deal with “mixed feelings”, but, as the lines of poetry with which the note ends say, “The Truth is one and incapable of self-contradiction; / All knowledge that conflicts with itself is Poetic Fiction” (NYL: 119). Something that is “incapable of self-contradiction” is not the stuff of poetry, which needs the “half-truths we can synthesize” for its very existence. There is no room here for something called Poetic Truth: all poetry is by definition fiction.

Aesthetic delight is so dominant in a poem like “Leap Before You Look” that its intensely mixed feelings risk going unnoticed. But then its manner is beguilingly polite, as if in fear of offending. The poem plays around with language in a self-consciously formal manner, the delight in its own procedures affecting the tone unsettlingly. The greater the demands on the poet of its formal game, the smaller the demands on the reader, or so it seems, for its expression is deceptively clear. A seductively deliberate fait accompli, its message is that lack of deliberation is the order of the day. Its ludic arena is highly restricted, a fact that makes the proposed leap all the riskier. John Fuller, pointing out the poem’s “ingeniously” artful “pseudo-villanelle” form, argues that “such technical shadow-boxing” gives the poem a “sense of circumspection [which] nicely underlines the ‘danger’ which is the subject of the poem”. Fuller also writes that the subject of the poem is “the risk involved in making the existential choice of life, more specifically the suggestion that Kallman might follow him in becoming a Christian.” (Fuller 1998: 397). That circumspection takes the form of a deference (“Much can be said for social savoir-faire”) which, it

proposes, must be put at risk; and beneath the social niceties is an awesome Kierkegaardian "solitude ten thousand fathoms deep [which] / Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear."[6] The social savoir-faire of this address knows that it is playing artfully with its (poetic) audience, those being wooed to take the recklessly unsociable leap, even as it contemplates the loneliness where "no one is watching" and where questions of audience are beside the point. The cosily friendly "my dear" plays with and off those friendless fathoms with artfully polite circumspection. The poem sounds like an invitation expecting circumspectly polite resistance (and Kallman never did accept the invitation).[7]

Poetry is time-ridden, it belongs to History and our fallen condition, but it can make us, within its enclosed arenas, its parables, conscious of the timeless. The "Coda" to "Archaeology", one of the last poems Auden wrote, concludes with the assertion that "History / is nothing to vaunt of" since it is "made … by the criminal in us", whereas "goodness is timeless". Just as poetry is born of our devilish mixed feelings, so History is the child of "the criminal in us". Only in myths and rites, we have just been told, can we escape our time-bound individuality ("Only in rites / can we renounce our oddities / and be truly entired"), the pre-eminent instance being the "abominable" rite of the crucifixion. That rite, with its attendant criminal in us, Auden contemplated at length in "Horae Canonicae". The rest of this chapter will be devoted to this sequence, for the crucifixion presented the poet with a challenge that focused his mixed and guilty feelings about the role of poetry.[8]

In his commonplace book A Certain World Auden insists on the impossibility of Good Friday as a subject for poetry: "Christmas and Easter can be subjects for poetry, but Good Friday, like Auschwitz, cannot. The reality is so horrible …. Poems about Good Friday have, of course, been written, but none of them will do." He goes

on to sketch in an argument that underpins the progress of "Horae Canonicae": "Just as we were all, potentially, in Adam when he fell" – which is the idea motivating the first poem, "Prime" – "so we were all, potentially, in Jerusalem on that first Good Friday" – which is the motive for "Terce" and "Sext". The puzzle behind the whole sequence, and its central poem "Nones" in particular, is indicated when Auden goes on to imagine himself as a witness to the crucifixion, "a Hellenized Jew from Alexandria visiting an intellectual friend"; and "averting my eyes from the disagreeable spectacle, I resume our fascinating discussion about the nature of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful" (ACW: 168-9). The poetry of "Horae Canonicae" spends its time averting its eyes from the disagreeable spectacle, elaborately circumventing the subject. At the heart of the sequence is the intractability of the crucifixion as a subject for poetry: its meaning is that it cannot get at the meaning. And the larger implication is that this is what happens every day of our lives: we do not, we cannot because it is "so horrible", think about Christ's martyrdom, even though, or indeed because, it informs everything we do and are. That is why Auden called the sequence "a series of secular poems based on the Office" (emphasis added),[9] because the focus is the life lived (and not lived) in the shadow of, and necessarily despite, the Cross.

In approaching the events of the crucifixion in relation to the daily life of the individual with his temporal "oddities" and to mankind's guilt and suffering, "Horae Canonicae" takes its cue from that pre-conversion poem "about suffering", "Musée des Beaux Arts", turning it, with the benefit of hindsight, into a proleptically Christian poem. Fuller has pointed out the "rich double meaning" in this poem's first word, "for it is Breugel's very circuitousness of approach ('about' in a different sense) that Auden is interested in …. In Breugel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, the painter

presents a momentous event in a world of diurnal unconcern" (Fuller: 266).[10] Likewise Auden approaches his subject circuitously, for before his poem gets round to mentioning the Breugel painting in line 14, it notes, as if in passing, the world's unconcern both at "the miraculous birth" (the word "Christ" being studiedly circumvented) and, almost in the same breath, at the crucifixion: "They never forgot / That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow in a corner…." The whole matter of the Incarnation passed barely noticed on the stage of History. "Horae Canonicae", then, is "about" the crucifixion in the same way that "Musée des Beaux Arts" is "about suffering". Running its course anyhow in a corner is how the dreadful martyrdom is presented in the sequence, or, rather, extensively circumvented among a world of richly elaborated diurnal unconcern. As ever, Auden as entertainer of systems shadows the sequence, for the Offices of the canonical hours along with many other tables of categories, either borrowed or invented (historical, theological, anthropological, social, physiological, personal), provided the poet with systems to be imaginatively exploited, affording him the opportunity to exercise his fallen nature, the criminal in him, to give the devilish father of poetry his due.[11] This "Poetic Fiction" is "knowledge" that knowingly, and often with surprising humour, "conflicts with itself". It is also a quiet tour-de-force, a literary performance that knows it is performing, though never ostentatiously so.

The sequence confesses abundantly to feelings of guilt, of forgiveness, of the possibility of redemption, without coming across as "confessional". "Prime" achieves this effect by hauntingly enacting the individual's waking from sleep – in so doing intimating Auden's notion of the Fall as a psychological fact, "Man fault[ing] into consciousness" – in a mysterious lapse into consciousness, where the acting subject of the seductively welcoming opening adverbs is at first uncertain: "Simultaneously, as

soundlessly, / Spontaneously, suddenly / As, at the vaunt of the dawn…". Does the second "as" have the same function as the first; is one perhaps comparative, the other temporal? With the "dawning" of consciousness comes the self's implication in and resistance to historical guilt and responsibility, to the criminal in us. History may be "nothing to vaunt of" ("Archaeology"), but here the self is caught in the act of vaunting before it has become conscious enough to know better, "at the vaunt of the dawn". That phrase typifies the artful artlessness of "Prime". The internal rhyming and assonance, the patterns of sound weaving through each of the three long sentences that form the poem's three stanzas, give an air of automatic writing, homo ludens at his most playful, appropriate to the re-enactment of an everyman consciousness lighting out at its innocent dawn: "and I / The Adam sinless in our beginning". That phrase sounds like an innocent jingle, though the echo of "sinless" in "beginning" holds what is in store. The fortuitousness of this art is part of our (fallen) humanity, is the implication, one to be spelt out in "Nones", where the poet happens upon the chanciness of the rhyme "will" and "kill". "Holy this moment, wholly in the right": one chime, happy at the start of the second stanza, plays off against another, not so happy, at the end of the poem, where the poet's "name / Stands for my historical share of care". Individuation, the decline from the general Adam to the particular named person, brings with it consciousness of self and other, of individual and society, of inherited guilt and responsibility, the world of time, the "living" and the "dying", of all that makes us human.

From the poet's Christian perspective this is to state the obvious – "Paradise / Lost of course" – but the triumph of the poem has been to create a simulacrum of time suspended, a timeless now, this holy moment, before the onset of History and being in time. Thus in the first stanza the sense of timelessness comes in large part from the

spiralling syntax, those suspended “as” adverbs giving way to clauses that take in even as they pass over what is to come, what has been left behind, and, disarmingly, what is, or is to become, the sequence’s central subject, intimated with circuitously ironic understatement as “an historical mistake”, a way of putting it that conjures up an aversion “from the disagreeable spectacle”. Not until the stanza’s end do we arrive at the main clause, and the moment out of time “Between my body and the day”, between sleeping and waking, self and other, unconsciousness and consciousness – the moment which becomes the existential “presentness” of a new world in the second stanza, which also ends, via a similar syntactic spiralling, timelessly where it began, suspended in the “holy” time before the original sin, “wholly in the right”, and before the onset of History. To say that this Edenic moment is re-created in the optative mood is to emphasise the knowing fictionality of this seductive literary wish-fulfilment. The knowingness is in the playful phrasing: “the vaunt of the dawn” teeters on the edge of self-parody, “the nocturnal rummage / Of its rebellious fronde” sounds as if the submerged political analogy (“fronde” refers to French insurrectionaries) is being mildly ribbed, and so on. Such moments are always poised to slip into graver images and sounds. The effect unsettles, questioning the numinousness of the experience. The wavering tones belong to a poet with an irremediably (and perhaps in his own eyes irredeemably) worldly and ironic intelligence, even, or especially, when approaching the numinous and otherworldly.

As a series of “secular” poems “Horae Canonicae” gives the devilish-criminal in the poet ample scope, especially when it comes to the next poem, “Terce”, with its thumbnail sketches of those, including the poet, who are inevitably to participate in the crucifixion, sketches drawn at times amusedly, at times laconically, the worldly tone turning world-weary. As in “Musée des Beaux Arts” life will continue willy-nilly

while the abominable rite occurs, and some details from that poem carry over into this: in particular the hangman's comically friendly dog recalls the earlier poem's dogs with their "doggy life". The earlier poem's daily unconcern gets transmuted in "Terce" into the disregard of the small and large deities who "Cannot be bothered with this moment". That casual tone has turned by the last line into the deadly irony of "knows that by sundown / We shall have had a good Friday" (more deadly than Eliot's "in spite of that, we call this Friday good").[12] The stifling by brackets of the knotty and central theological paradox of free will and God's omniscience underscores the intransigently secular perspective: "(that is what / We can never forgive. If he knows the answers, / Then why are we here, why is there even dust?)". Does the speaker know he is echoing the Bible ("For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return", Genesis, 3:19)? The poet must know, but in this fictional enactment his persona evidently does not. What, asks the casual parenthesis, is the point of it all, the meaning of life no less? "Sext" likewise indulges a worldly-wise manner in its portrayal of the three components of any civilization (a section of the poem for each) that make possible the crucifixion: those with a vocation, the executives, the crowd. But each section, written in the poet's most characteristic and lively diagnostic mode, is brought up short by an absolute and unanswerable paradox. The first section asks where society would be without those who have a vocation; and yet, it abruptly ends, without them "there would be no agents" for the crucifixion. It is not just that we are stymied by the paradox; we are perplexed by the sudden negation of the poet's imaginatively inventive art that has but a moment before been wittily creating and categorizing a society.

If "Horae Canonicae" is not confessional in the manner of, say, Lowell's "Life Studies", the figure of the poet is throughout intermittently but continually implicated

and questioned in the stylistic ways this account has been suggesting. If the poet, as he is imagined in "Terce" to have been before the crucifixion, does not know who he is to write about that day, he realizes it only too well in his aubade after the crucifixion, in "Prime". If coming to consciousness brings with it all the world of knowledge, endeavour, responsibility, guilt and death, it brings with it also an awareness that that Truth has been told and fictionalised in poetry only too famously: "I draw breath … / … and the cost, / No matter how, is Paradise / Lost of course and myself owing a death". Suspending Milton's epic across the line-break like this enacts the opening up of the Edenic moment only to experience its immediate withdrawal as the contingent world of time and guilt impinges. It also underlines the literariness of this experience: it is a story told often before. At the same time, the implication of the poet in this sinful world casts a shadowy guilt over his literary endeavour. A curiously covert link exists between sin and poetry here, created by the way in which the line elides Paradise Lost and the guilty poet with not so much as a comma between them. And if the "breath-death" echo makes its point with too obvious an audibility, that could be the point: "of course" the story is only too familiar, at any rate to the card-carrying Christian.

To the poet, that presents a particular challenge, as is evident from the hauntingly powerful "Nones". At the heart of this heartfelt poem, which is central (in both senses of the word) to the sequence, is a massive absence, an emotional blank. Where we are now, at this moment in History, is nowhere; and in the midst of this absence we encounter the poet's doppelgänger. After evoking the post-crucifixion sense of existential desolation ("We are left alone with our feat", a bitterly laconic circumlocution for the abominable rite) and the now meaningless world of human action, the poet fleetingly includes his former poetic self, for among the "discarded"

artifacts are snatches of poetry ("Abandoned branch-lines", "Grindstones buried in nettles") that recall Auden's prelapsarian youthful poetic landscapes (which even then were on the verge of lapsing), the post-industrial "watershed" of "dismantled washing-floors, / Snatches of tramline". Apprehensions of the numinous and timeless may be explained only "too well" now by the fact of the Incarnation and its culmination, and the crucifixion may have the potential to make sense of History, but for the time being our guilt-ridden existence will continue inexplicably, is the implication, however we "misrepresent" or "use this event" (including using it in poetry). But the poet would escape his sense of desolation in an emotionally exhausted aversion of eyes and mind. However, "our dreaming wills" only "seem to escape", for what follows in the penultimate stanza is a series of increasingly nightmarish imagery which, as it proceeds, in Anthony Hecht's words, "takes on the somewhat vulgar contrivances of an unconscious with the taste and standards of grade-B movies." Hecht is evidently not intending to be negative, for, as he implies, the encounter at the end of the stanza puts the nightmare into ironic perspective, "the arch-villain" of the movie turning out to be the poet's doppelgänger "in Poe-like seclusion".[13] In his self-absorption the poet-figure has been inventing cinematic scenarios that, however compelling, come across as all too knowing re-writes of early Auden again, with an eye for would-be diagnostic details, mysterious antagonists and significant landscapes, and an ear for the fast tone and authoritative air. If phrases like "latent robbers" and "hostile villages at the heads of fjords" sound clichéd, they do so partly because early Auden, as its supreme practitioner, has accustomed us to this idiom of urgent sinister-comic threat ("latent robbers" is a good joke: they lie hidden and, being robbers, are potential liars). The dream comes across as out of place in this poem, but that is the point: the doppelgänger poet is being shown up.

For the dream belongs to the “will” and is therefore the product of a misplaced effort to explain and rationalize. When the will relaxes there ensues in the final stanza a poetic release, undesolate and distinctly lacking the tonal games of the previous stanza, in the spirit of these words by Auden about the world of nature, the un-Kierkegaardian (he insists) unconscious world of universal being: “every man has a second relation to God which is neither unique nor existential: as a creature composed of matter, as a biological organism, every man, in common with everything else in the universe, is related by necessity to the God who created that universe and saw that it was good, for the laws of nature to which, whether he likes it or not, he must conform are of divine origin” (Canterbury Pilgrims: 42). If these words sound preachy, their equivalent in “Nones” does not. The final stanza prays that our “biological organism” may restore “the order we try to destroy”, in an ignorance different from the poem’s earlier vexed and desolate incomprehension. In the poem’s concluding vision, of creaturely care and universal law, the poet can make his point about the natural order while allowing himself a chuckle of envy with a joke about hens in “pecking order”. And as ever he cannot resist seeing his earlier poetic self in a new light: the youthful line “As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman” arrogantly (or so the later Auden might have supposed) paralleled human and creaturely panoptic perspectives, whereas here in “Nones” “the hawk” gazes on our fallen world “without blinking”, with a quasi-divine unillusioned but caring indifference.

In “Compline”, the last service before sleep, which returns the sequence to the state of unconsciousness with which it began, the poet asks, “Can poets (can men in television) / Be saved?” The parenthetical phrase puts the poet on a par with all who have to do with an audience and a public, which is everyone, since, though all individuals, we are all responsible (immediately after the crucifixion, in “Nones”, “we

have lost our public"). The poet admits that he can make no sense of what happened "between noon and three", the hours Jesus hung on the Cross, instead recollecting "Actions, words, that could fit any tale, / And I fail to see either plot / Or meaning". But if his poetic fictions cannot fill his amnesia satisfactorily, this means that the only recourse is to fall back on prayer, which the end of "Compline" proceeds to do. This prayer, like all prayer, must learn to accept the given, numbering the poet, humorously, as one of the ineffectual "poor s-o-b's" who desires to be spared "in the youngest day", which, Fuller surmises, "may be both the Last Day and the ever-present Now" (Fuller: 461). "All knowledge that conflicts with itself is Poetic Fiction": even if prayer would see beyond this, having to accept that "facts are facts", always the poetry knows that it can never get further than a "clear expression of mixed feelings", can never reach "the Truth". Both the Last Day and the ever-present Now, the existential moment which is no sooner present than past, are beyond poetry, words even. And the ineffable is precisely, in the words that begin "Nones", "What we know to be not possible", a way of putting it that undoes itself even as it is uttered.

NOTES

[1] Contribution entitled "W. H. Auden" to Modern Canterbury Pilgrims: The Story of Twenty-three Converts and why they chose the Anglican Communion, ed. The Dean of New York [James A. Pike] (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1956): 38.

[2] As quoted in Richard Davenport-Hines, Auden (London: Heinemann, 1995): 202.

[3] "The Good Life", Christianity and the Social Revolution, eds. John Lewis, Karl Polanyi and Donald K. Kitchin (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935): 31.

[4] Quoted in Carpenter, p. 283. See Carpenter, pp. 306-7, for Niebuhr's influence.

[5] Stan Smith, W. H. Auden (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985): 130. Smith is developing a deconstructionist argument about the radical challenge of New Year Letter to the notion that "language has to correspond to a fixed reality and its sole purpose is to ensure that fixity".

[6] For Kierkegaard's "ten thousand fathoms", see Fuller: 397.

[7] See Carpenter: 300-1.

[8] "Prime" and "Nones" first appeared as separate poems in Nones (1952). The whole sequence was published as the third and final section of The Shield of Achilles (1955): 61-80.

[9] See Fuller: 456

[10] Fuller also (267) hazards a proleptically Christian reading of "Musée des Beaux Arts": "To what extent, the reader wonders with biographical hindsight, was the poet himself 'reverently, passionately waiting / For the miraculous birth'?"

[11] See Fuller: 457.

[12] T. S. Eliot, "East Coker" IV, Four Quartets, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

[13] Anthony Hecht, The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W. H. Auden (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993): 347.